

# White Light, White Heat

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**Klimt/Schiele: Drawings from the Albertina Museum, Vienna.**

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Klimt drew like a lover – yielding, hasty, indolent, daring. He drew in order to relax after a day given over to painting, or in preparation for a large canvas. Nakedness, in one of his figure studies for *Philosophy*, tells of our human inherent inability to hide – like shame, in origin, but without the hang-ups. Another study for *Medicine* shows reclined and exhausted old bodies – stylized flesh with no shading, bodies clutched in their frailty, thrown to the vagaries of the world.

Klimt does not take a line for a walk; he twists it, bends it, gives it a jolt, unravels it around the cherished object, astonished by his own moves. His drawings are free of the sophistries of transcendence and allegory. This is even more so in Schiele's drawings. The originality of expression and startling rigour of design displayed by Schiele make me giddy. How can this much freedom, audacity and severity ever be possible – and all combined? But then this was *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, a cradle of subversion, innovation, and contradictions; a city of bold inventors: Freud, Mahler, Schoenberg – a multi-ethnic, dynamic hub of commerce and artistic/intellectual cross-contamination.

Both painters were extraordinary draughtsmen, but while Klimt drew to unwind, to improve his technique and train his eye, Schiele did so in order to understand himself and the world – no less – and with the same absorption and gravity devoted to painting. In some drawings (e.g., *Female Nude*, 1910) we notice what he himself describes as “inner light shining forth from the body”. The description is crystal-clear, but the curators feel obliged to officiously render it as “auras”. They follow in this an interpretative tradition that insists on making of the twenty-year old artist a card-carrying theosophist. Halos are then read as astral radiance, the distinctive spirit of individuals emitting life from within like Christmas trees en route to the universal and the divine.

As with allegorical interpretations, these transcendentalist readings are facile and sidestep Schiele's complexity. The inner light underlines the human figure's fragmentation, lighting up its enduring separation and difference. “Light reflects off the paint rather than the paper –

Jennifer Dyer writes – which adds both depth and luminescence to the halo and the body”. She goes on to say something extraordinary: “The figure’s body is then *substantiated by light*” (2001, p. 90, emphasis added). Schiele’s figures are not made up of flesh as we understand it, but by the *dynamism of active forces*. Schiele’s bodies are neither fixed nor *sub-stantial* (nothing *stands underneath*). They are made of light, and we can only see them as light. However, this does not mean the bodies in Schiele’s drawings figures are “mere optical effects” We should not forget that light is “both visual and thermal” (Dyer, *ibid*, p. 90), i.e., light allows us to see things and also produces heat.

“I invented colours for vowels!” another young artist, Arthur Rimbaud, had cried out a few decades earlier, and the experiment is somewhat similar in Schiele. What Rimbaud did for poetry, Schiele did for drawing and painting. The endless juxtapositions of a handful of colours – hot red, warm yellow, cool green – engender variations in heat. And the viewer can feel it. As later in the work of Francis Bacon, the visual experience of confronting Schiele’s human figures becomes physical. Heat means passion, emotion, and deep feeling. His images are erotic and they *involve* us in the passion that emanates from them. To be involved makes us participants rather than voyeurs and this is why accusations of obscenity levelled at Egon Schiele missed the point as did similar accusations directed at Freud and his *Three Essays on Sexuality* (published in 1905).

Commenting on *Lenaia*, the festival of Dionysus when revellers march in procession chanting hymns to the phallus, Heraclitus remarks that Hades and Dionysus are one and the same, which is why the revellers’ actions are not obscene but sacred. The heat of sex exuded by Schiele’s images are forever linked to finitude and mortality, and explored through his undaunted gaze. He catches the essentials – limbs splayed out, rumped hair, hairy vulvas. He makes visible what we fail to see (or do not dare to see, or gloss over) within multiple juxtapositions of light/heat that constitutes the organismic life of a single isolated individual – the invisible in the visible. This is pure phenomenology, a visual/tactile phenomenology, a field of forces with no hankering for either being or the ennobled rhetoric of intersubjectivity. Overstatement and distortion are not accidental, or done for gratuitous effect. Schiele’s images condemn us to meaning; they are simultaneously within the double mirrors of fact *and* metaphor.

For him, as for Klimt since 1905 when he left the renowned *Secession* (the official art movement he had helped establish), this meant a turn away from the grand space of state-sponsored and condescending patronage system to the terrain of dissonant art, an art that is in

conflict with the mainstream while at the same time renewing and injecting new meaning into it.

“I feel not punished but cleansed!” a twenty-two year old Schiele writes in his cell at Neulebgbach prison. “For Art and for my Loved Ones I will gladly endure to the end!” he writes on 25 April 1912 at the margin of a portrait depicting the suffering, twisted body, surrendered to unwarranted bliss and love – to Art with a capital A.

I don't buy the curators' depiction of Egon Schiele as a wannabe St Francis, martyr and prophet of Art. But his youthful commitment and seriousness is nevertheless sacred – the innocent, uncompromising expectation that Art is everything.

At this point I stumble on the most beautiful drawing of all, *Female Semi-nude, 1910* – that lost, direct and tender gaze, her elegant wrists, her naked sex. In his self portraits, my artist friend says, it's as if Schiele depicts his body from within. My body aches as we walk around slowly and stand a long time gazing while the strain and stretch of his self-portraits duplicate this physical pain. Schiele is interested in the self as a novel and strange entity threatened and undone by modernity. Unlike Salvador Dalí and scores of others after him, emphasis on his own 'self' is not vain but driven by scrutiny, uncertainty, and a tangible and all too-real dread of insubstantiality. Schiele studied his own body in his studio reflected in two mirrors, exploring the ephemeral state of body/mind produced by acrobatic stretches. Visitors take snapshots with their phones for ornamental posts on social media; Schiele's body is multiplied by hundred virtual mirrors.

Right here lies another forgotten existential lesson: the importance, conveyed by Schiele, of undoing the self – the lonely, separate insubstantial self – before joining the recitation of uplifting homilies on relatedness.

His 1913's *Erlosung* (Redemption) made me think of Sartre: putting on a thick greenish/grey/reddish coat, the protagonist steps into the new day. He constructs his self anew for the day ahead – the bittersweet adventure of everyday life.

Stepping outside, I notice the tired vendors of Klimt/Schiele artefacts under the luminous ceiling on the RA's top floor; they look visibly bored as the cylindrical lift parcels out new visitors at regular intervals onto the mock-neoclassical corridor. Among the Klimt/Schiele souvenirs, there is a copy of Arthur Schnitzler's *Dream Story*, the Viennese novel that inspired Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. Just when I am about to bore my artist friend with unwanted comments on the preposterousness of the movie, something else catches my eye. It is a Penguin copy of Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*. The cover shows one of Schiele's haunting, peerless self-portraits. I feel placated, happy even.

References

Dyer, J. (2011) *Serial Images: The Modern Art of Iteration* Vienna and Berlin: LIT